Reviewer’s report

Title: ACCOUNTABILITY IN THE HEALTH SYSTEM OF TAMILNADU, INDIA: EXPLORING ITS MULTIPLE MEANINGS

Version: 0 Date: 14 Jan 2019

Reviewer: Marta Schaaf

Reviewer's report:

This paper addresses an important topic (government initiated social accountability for health) and is fairly straightforward and organized. The paper is a robust discussion of an interesting (at least I think so) topic.

I have suggested minor revisions, and suggest that the authors strengthen the discussion in particular around the efficiency frame. Most of my comments relate to the discussion and the conclusion.

The line by line edits and questions are below:

- Abstract, background: "Research on policy implementation has called for a policy analysts..." You can delete "a."

- Background: The para beginning "A number of studies have also shown..." could benefit from a concluding sentence.

- Background: I think the para beginning "In India, the NRHM" could be a bit more specific. What "health systems entitlements" are at issue? You go on to say that the NRHM included a mandate to the various state governments to include civil society organizations in the implementation of "the various components listed above." How is this different from community-based monitoring? Or, do you mean that civil society should be involved in the implementation of ALL elements of NRHM, including community-based monitoring? The next para refers to the fact that the "NRHM also called for the increased involvement of civil society in the implementation of the various programmes." I am confused... it seems you made this same point in the previous paragraph?

- Background: "This calls for more accountability is further emerging in parallel with institutional transitions in public systems that have changed traditional relationships between states and citizens in complex ways as well as the capacity of the state to respond." Since you
raise this point later in the paper, I think it would be helpful to say more here. Why do you think this is relevant to Tamil Nadu?

- The next sentence reads, "furthermore, the patchy nature of the implementation of the concept points to a possibility..." What concept? Accountability?

- Methodology, the research setting: 'In terms of a health system like the rest of India.' This is an awkward phrasing. It is a bit hard to understand.

- Methodology, the research setting: "Tamilnadu is the only state in India that has not only..." This sentence is a fragment. It too is hard to understand.

- In the next para (lines 40 to 50 on page 7), you refer to "different contexts." I am not sure what different contexts you are referring to.

- Methodology, the research setting, page 8: "This research attempts to uncover they underlying beliefs and meanings on accountability." I think you should substitute "regarding" for "on." This would be more clear.

- Methodology, the conceptual framework, page 8 first para. The last sentence of the first para is not clear to me. What do you mean by the causal model? The causal model for how accountability is realized? I think just breaking the last sentence into two sentences would make it more clear to your reader.

- Methodology, choice of research participants: The number of interviewees is pretty small. I think you should acknowledge this limitation and explain why you still feel your data are adequate.

- Methodology, choice of research participants: You provide the length of experience of the interviewees. Why do you think this is relevant? You might explain briefly.

- Methodology, data collection: I was a little confused as to why your interview guides did not focus on policy or policy implementation, when you wanted to illustrate how policies are interpreted and re-interpreted at different levels of the health system. Can you justify the area of focus you had for the IDIs a bit more? Eg "We included these areas because we sought to..."

- Methodology, data analysis, page 10 para 2: the slashes are distracting to the reader. I would try to rephrase where you have meaning/assumptions, programme/design etc.
- Results, page 12 lines 35-38. This sentence is cryptic. Can you saw more? Provide an example or just expand your point by one sentence?

- Results, page 13: it seems that some of your interviewees also doubted the legitimacy of NGOs, which is a somewhat separate point. Did you find this in the data? Do you think it is worth mentioning?

- Results, page 13, lines 47-57: I dont think the quote you use on page 14, lines 1-5 justifies these statements. Your quote doesn't relate to motivation, or the causes of withdrawals from the subcentre. If you have more in your data to butress your point, you can add quotes or summarize the data.

- Accountability as efficiency. I am curious as to why you chose the concept of efficiency... what you describe seems to me to be more about effectiveness, i.e. achieving the best results. For example, the fist quote - "let us ask people what is the need..." and the second quote, "See we have to have..." don't seem to me to be about efficiency, but about accountability for achieving the priorities identified by the community.

- Accountability as efficiency, page 15, lines 27-30: "This perspective acknowledged a gap between the community and the system but attributed it to the inability of the community to make full use of the programmes." It would be good to justify this statement. Also, of course I haven't seen your data, but it seems to me to be at odds with the other elements of this framing. I might expect that this perspective would attribute the gap between the community and the health system to poor implementation of NRHM?

- Accountability as efficiency, page 15, lines 55-60: to me, this quote doesn't fit, or it needs more context. It could just as easily be used to butress the "accountability as transformation" perspective too, right?

- Discussion, page 21: you have many "it has been pointed out." You might change this to a more active voice or change your wording in a few places.

- Discussion, page 22, first para: this paragraph is a lot of quotes put together. I think you might offer more synthesis and analysis and reduce the number of direct quotes. This might lead you to a stronger, more concise concluding sentence.

- Discussion, page 23, first para: This para seems to be about informal privatization, where as the discussion in the efficiency section seemed to me to be about making the system work better, rather than foisting state responsibility onto the community.
- Discussion, page 23, para 2: Since Murthy and Klugman were not part of your hypothesis, I don't think you need them here. Or, you can keep them and integrate them a bit more into the analysis. I also don't understand the how it fits exactly; the quote on the higher degree of accountability doesn't seem to describe "accountability as transformation" to me. It seems to describe "accountability as effectiveness."

- The quotes you have in the accountability as results section are all from NGOs, correct? You might address this in the discussion.

- Discussion, page 23 para 3, "eroding the health system's capacity in providing services and its overall autonomy in planning." Again, this did not come through strongly for me in the results section.

- Discussion, page 24, para 1: you state that "all these dimensions of accountability are crucial." I don't quite understand this. Couldn't you have a program where all stakeholders agree the accountability at issue falls under one frame?

- Discussion, page 24, last para: you mention that the three perspectives...clearly demonstrate that there are deep differences among the perspectives.." Were there discrepancies within transcripts, or were people coherent within an interview?

- Discussion, last sentence: Training, monitoring and the role of an external agency seem to be a very narrow frame on what you just discussed, such as what accountability should be. If you meant the sentence as an example for the idea that there is reinterpretation at each level, then you might add a more general concluding sentence.

- Conclusions: the first sentence of this section appears to be a sentence fragment.

- You attribute the opening up of spaces to pressure from the IFIs. What about the demands of Indian activists or the diffusion of human rights norms? Or, do you see this all as part and parcel of neoliberalism?

- Page 26, para 1. The last sentence has two periods.

**Level of interest**

Please indicate how interesting you found the manuscript:

An article of importance in its field
Quality of written English
Please indicate the quality of language in the manuscript:

Needs some language corrections before being published

Declaration of competing interests
Please complete a declaration of competing interests, considering the following questions:

1. Have you in the past five years received reimbursements, fees, funding, or salary from an organisation that may in any way gain or lose financially from the publication of this manuscript, either now or in the future?

2. Do you hold any stocks or shares in an organisation that may in any way gain or lose financially from the publication of this manuscript, either now or in the future?

3. Do you hold or are you currently applying for any patents relating to the content of the manuscript?

4. Have you received reimbursements, fees, funding, or salary from an organisation that holds or has applied for patents relating to the content of the manuscript?

5. Do you have any other financial competing interests?

6. Do you have any non-financial competing interests in relation to this paper?

If you can answer no to all of the above, write 'I declare that I have no competing interests' below. If your reply is yes to any, please give details below.

I declare that I have no competing interests.

I agree to the open peer review policy of the journal. I understand that my name will be included on my report to the authors and, if the manuscript is accepted for publication, my named report including any attachments I upload will be posted on the website along with the authors' responses. I agree for my report to be made available under an Open Access Creative Commons CC-BY license (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). I understand that any comments which I do not wish to be included in my named report can be included as confidential comments to the editors, which will not be published.

I agree to the open peer review policy of the journal